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The Power of Hunger

The Jews grip their meager ration of bread, their bony hands shaking in the cold. They take small bites, weary of wandering eyes. As the last crumb slides down their throats, their skeletal bodies cry out for more. Thousands of African men, women, and children sit chained to each other, their wrists sore, their throats dry, and their stomachs empty. They open their mouths wide, as a few drops of water are poured from a clay jug onto their parched tongues. Unlike a scene from a horror film, this moment is a terrible reality for millions of enslaved Jews and African Americans. Day and night, hunger controls their actions, is their main motivator. Not simply the hunger for nourishment, but a hunger for freedom, an escape from the prison that holds them captive both physically and psychologically. For these unfortunate souls, hunger comes in many forms, but apart from their religion is the one persistent idea that binds them all together. In the novels Night by Elie Wiesel and The Glory Field by Walter Dean Meyers, the characters’ hunger for life and freedom are themes echoed similarly throughout both books, and though written by different authors during varying time periods they draw parallels on many levels. But while both novels stress the theme of hunger for God, throughout the story they disagree on the specific struggles and the relationship their characters will have with religion as they mature

As the young African sits chained to the floor of the sweltering wood ship and the young Jewish prisoner lays frozen on the metal floor of the rattling train they both concentrate on taking the next breath that means they are still alive, both think of the family they’ve lost, but when both lose control they stray into the dark and dangerous void where a hunger for sustenance and an incredible determination to stay alive fills their every waking thought, an unquenchable desire that waits patiently for its chance to consume them. While unknowing adolescents may joke about starving for lack of a proper breakfast, most have never been subjected to all out hunger, where the next meal (or lack thereof) could mean the difference between life and death. “No one knows they are fortunate until they become unfortunate” is a quote that comes to mind when one thinks of the unsuspecting Jews who despised their lives in the ghetto or the African boys who grew upset after losing a game against friends, only to find a much worse fate awaited them. While they never could have suspected what was to come, the victims of the slave trade as well as the Holocaust, never fully appreciated their quality of life before being enslaved and stripped of their rights and identities. In the concentration camps of Europe it was all the prisoners could do to evade death. Each meal meant the promise of living until the next one. After only his second night at Auschwitz, Elie explains how he had reached a point of hunger where he didn’t stop to think or look at his meal before eating, “ I was dreadfully hungry and swallowed my ration on the spot” (Wiesel 41). Here Elie truly illustrates the instantaneous effect the concentration camp has on its prisoners. His change from the spoiled brat who refused to touch the unsatisfactory food during his first night at Auschwitz, to the starving prisoner who doesn’t stop to take a breath before finishing his ration, is less than 24 hours. His literal hunger for food, and the nourishment it provides, is intense and unrelenting. So too, is his hunger for life and his hope that by eating even the most unpleasant meals he will continue to survive and see a day outside the walls of a concentration camp. Buried in Elie’s attempts to curb his malnourishment and starvation is a different kind of hunger: the uncontrollable desire to survive.

Take a step back from the 1940’s and rewind history to a date in the late 1700’s. Off the coast of Sierra Leone, Muhammad Bilal rests limply on the deck of a turbulent slave ship headed for America, along with the aches of his entire body, his stomach cries out for want of an elusive food and drink. He remarks how the soon-to-be-slaves are fed once every several days and receive water only when it is dropped down onto them from a communal jug. But, as Muhammad suffers he promises himself that he won’t let his intense hunger and thirst consume him, rather he will do everything in his limited power to stay alive, "He gathered what moisture he could from his parched throat, licked his lips, and whispered a vow to himself that he would live" (7). More than anything else, Muhammad hungers for life. His main motivation is to see the dawn of the next day. Muhammad’s mere existence on the slave ship depends on each and every inhalation he takes. To reach his destination alive and never to forget his strong and independent identity along the way are his only goals. No longer is he concerned with the events of the past or what his new life in a foreign country will bring, all he knows is that his throat is dangerously dry and his breathing incredibly slow and labored. a raging wave of hunger for life and being roars up inside of him, Muhammad takes care to coax it along and encourage it to expand and sweep throughout his entire body, carrying with it the spirit of life, while blocking all thoughts of the alternative.

In those rare moments when the prisoners of the Holocaust and the victims of slavery manage to keep their intense physical hunger at bay, they often experience an all together different form of hunger: the desire for freedom. While it is a burning inferno of a desire during the beginning of their struggle, one that threatens to overtake common sense and blur judgment, over time it dies down, eventually becoming just another numb feeling that crowds a prisoner’s already full heart. Only occasionally when the right spark is ignited does it flare up again, fast and dangerous, but unlike in the beginning, quick to burn out. Sometimes it comes unwillingly, forced upon the recipient like the blow of a truncheon. Marking the entrance to the concentration camp of Auschwitz an ominous metal gate reads, “Arbeit Macht Frei” literally translated to mean “work will set you free” a lie the Jewish prisoners, all marked for death, stare at everyday and even subconsciously believe. All they could wish for is a reprieve from the torturous world created by the Nazis. Some prisoners, Elie Wiesel included, hunger for and believes so deeply in the power of freedom that death in itself is a means of freedom, for it means an escape from the horror he and his fellow prisoners, endure day and night. As his father dies before him, Elie displays a unique set of emotions, “I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears. And, in the depth of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience, could I have searched it, I might perhaps have found something like--free at last” (Wiesel 106). Elie has come to believe that anything, even death would provide a greater sense of freedom and an escape from the horrendous and hostile conditions he experiences every day. Rather than foolishly mourn the death of his beloved father, Elie rejoices at the fact that he is finally free from the atrocious life created for the Jews by Hitler’s anti-Semitics. For Elie’s father, death is its own liberty, and provides him freedom from the life he left behind. From the day of his liberation, onwards, Elie hungers for freedom from the horrors committed against Jews, not just physically, but also mentally. To this day, many Holocaust survivors still hunger for the freedom that will grant them an escape from the frightful nightmares and subconscious memories of their lives inside the camps. While they may have been freed from the physical gates that held them captive the survivors will never be free of the psychological gates that Hitler created to hold them prisoner in their own bodies, the very same gates that kept them from revolting against their captors.

The same can also be said for the African Americans who were freed from the mental and psychological restraints of slavery only to find that the very same gates they had fled through reappeared in front of them in the form of prejudice and racism, barring them from the opportunities they deserved. Naturally African American slaves often thought about and yearned for freedom, in fact Grandma Dolly once claimed that the desire for freedom came at some point during the lives of every African American,

Every black person who ain't dead sooner or later gets them a freedom dream, Saran said.  Sometimes it comes at night, and sometimes it just comes in the middle of the day.  They out working a task and then they start dreaming of being free as one of them birds.  Doing what they want to do, raising a family and working for themselves instead of some master, (Meyers 31)

The slaves have about as much respect as caged animals, held within a certain boundary and forced to work against their will. As the monotonous days pass by, the hunger for freedom swells up inside of them. For some, it reaches such a point as to become unbearable, leading the slave down a path of revolt or in Lem’s case, escape. While a slave’s the freedom dream may come at any time, once it grabs hold of its host it never lets go; only growing stronger and more powerful as time passes, filling the recipient with strength, courage, and hope for a future where slavery no longer exists.

Finally, as Elie Wiesel and the cast of The Glory Field experience and persevere through many instances of intense physical and emotional hunger, one persistent drumbeat constantly echoes the theme of the characters’ hunger for God, relating the ups and downs of the relationship they will share with Him. However different Elie’s God may be from Muhammad’s or Luvenia’s, he still experiences a great need for his presence and a constant hunger for his guidance throughout his trying life in the concentration camp. As a young boy in Sighet, the worship of his religion was the main focus of Elie Wiesel’s life, “I believed profoundly. During the day I studied the Talmud, and at night I ran to the synagogue to weep over the destruction of the temple” (Wiesel 1). But, what makes Elie different from the characters of The Glory Field, is the life altering path which his religion took after he had spent time in the concentration camps. Very quickly, but not entirely strangely, the horrifying scenes Elie witnesses as a prisoner change him and cause him to differ in the way he thinks of God. In fact, during the hanging of a small angelic child, Elie describes how he not only began to question God, but lost faith in him entirely, “Where is He? Here He is. He is hanging here on these gallows” (Wiesel 62). As a prisoner behind Elie calls out asking where God is at this horrible moment and why he is letting such a crime be committed against an innocent child, Elie answers that along with the child, for him God has also died at the moment in the very same gallows. The corruption Elie has observed hardens him at the young age of fifteen and turns his world of beliefs upside down. It is here in our analysis that we see the greatest difference between Elie and the Lewis family. Unlike the Lewises, Elie Wiesel’s profound hunger for God has been stripped from him and replaced by a numb and empty void, a dark black hole no divine being can ever inhabit again.

For the Lewis family, it is an entirely different story; their hunger for God’s grace and guidance and their worship of his divine acts, only grows and intensifies as their trials and tribulations multiply. Unlike Elie, when terrible events occur in their family, the Lewises pray that God will look over and protect them and guide them so that they may overcome obstacles. No matter the circumstance, their faith is unwavering and plays a large part in their daily lives. When Lem and Joshua run away the Lewis family is uncertain of their whereabouts and worried about the consequences if they are found, they pray for God to look over them,

Oh, heavenly Father, look down on us tonight. Saran was praying, her thick voice even heavier than usual. ‘Look down on us and let us know You hear our prayers. O God, fill everybody’s heart with mercy tonight. Thank you, Jesus! Grandma Dolly called out. Fill all our hearts with Your goodness and Your mercy and don’t let sorrow touch us, sweet God. (Myers 19)

In the face of worry and doubt, the Lewis family sticks together, drawing from each other’s strength, never losing their loyalty to God, never questioning his choices and actions as Elie does, and most of all never once stopping to ponder whether or not He is really out there. The Lewises’ hunger for God and the relief and comfort He brings to their family drives and motivates them to wake up strong and resilient every day and endure whatever awaits them in the harsh world of slavery.

While the relationship the characters in Night and The Glory Field will have with their religion may waver between passionate and undetectable, their hunger for the opportunity of life, freedom both physically and psychologically, and the guidance of God, never will. From Elie and Muhammad’s similar struggles and desperate hunger for life, to Elie and the Lewis family’s contrasting views on the presence and worship of God, it is true both books agree on multiple aspects, but differ at least once when compared throughout this essay. Slavery and the Holocaust are such similar events in the terms of execution as well as the themes of discrimination and hatred displayed towards prisoners that they could be compared and contrasted hundreds of different ways. But the general consensus will be a thankfulness that the characters in both Night and The Glory Field, real unsung heroes of history, exist in modern literature to help illustrate the extent of devastation these events caused and to prevent them from ever being repeated.